

The Future of Libraries in the Work of S.R. Ranganathan

Frederick J. Friend

Scholarly Communication
University College London, UK
f.friend@ucl.ac.uk

1 Introduction

It is a measure of the greatness of S.R. Ranganathan that 35 years after his death, his way of looking at libraries can influence our strategies for today's digital library services. Forty years ago, as a student in the same London school of librarianship in which Ranganathan studied, I listened with awe to the lecturer's description of the Five Laws of Library Science. In those Five Laws Ranganathan expressed in the most succinct way possible the relationship between a library, a librarian, a library's content, and the reader. Even as a young student I could understand that the simplicity of the Five Laws could apply to the most complex of library structures or services. It is that simplicity of application in a complex environment that enables the Five Laws still to be relevant in the complex situations in today's digital libraries.

As a student I was less impressed with Ranganathan's Colon Classification, which I found difficult to apply in the practical classification classes at the University College London School of Librarianship. I hasten to add that the difficulties were entirely mine. Perhaps I lacked the patience to master Colon Classification, perhaps I lacked the logical mind of Ranganathan, perhaps it was just too different from the classification systems with which I had grown up. Whatever the difficulties in applying the Colon Classification, it is now possible to understand Ranganathan's approach to the classification of knowledge as being very relevant to today's digital libraries. The digital world rests upon the discipline of mathematics, and Ranganathan's mathematical approach to the classification of knowledge can teach us how to exploit the benefits from digital technology. In taking the relevance of Ranganathan's work in a digital library environment as the subject of this paper, I am conscious that a number of distinguished information scientists have already trod this path before me¹. My apology for looking at this topic again is

¹ Eugene Garfield was one of the first outside the library profession to recognise the relevance of the Colon Classification to broader information services such as citation

qualified by a belief that there is still much more to be said about the interaction of the Five Laws with the Colon Classification in today's environment.

2 A holistic approach to the future of library services

The future of libraries in a networked world is a matter of great debate. There are some policy-makers who say that libraries have no place in the future information environment, that users of information can discover all they need to know by searching the Web themselves. This view of the future sees the World Wide Web as a huge library in itself, removing the need for local libraries. It is also a view of the future in which there is no role for librarians as intermediaries between users and the information they need. Libraries and librarians are seen as representing the past, and it is against this background that we need to go back to first principles, exactly what S.R.Ranganathan did when 80 years ago he was given the opportunity to consider the future of libraries in India. The future for libraries as it appeared in 1924 was as full of uncertainties as the future for libraries appears today. The need for clear strategies for library development was as important in 1924 as it is in 2007. What can we learn from Ranganathan's way of looking at the role of libraries and the organization of knowledge?

The Five Laws describe an organic relationship between the user of a library, a librarian and the library's books and journals. Each of the Five Laws links one party in the relationship to another: a user to a book, a book to a user, a book to a library, a library to a librarian. Ranganathan's approach is what we would call today a holistic approach to library services, and it is an approach that we must preserve. As librarians have become more specialised - some in reader services, some in acquisitions or document supply, for example - there has been a danger that the relationship between the different parts of a library service and the contribution that each part makes to the whole has been lost. This risk has been the greater in large research libraries, which have not only had many different departments but also have often for administrative reasons separated some staff from contact with library users. Specialisation in a library career is good provided both library managers and the individual member of library staff retain a holistic view of the service.

2.1 Books are for use

Ranganathan's first law of library science, that "books are for use", is as relevant to digital content as it is to paper content. In his book "The Five Laws of Library Science" (Ranganathan, 1931) S.R.Ranganathan points to evidence of librarians' attempts to keep books away from users. Some of his examples

are unfair upon librarians, as for example books were chained at some times in history because of their high cost and not because of any maliciousness upon the part of librarians. However, Ranganathan's observation about over-zealous librarians restricting access is too accurate for comfort, and it is an observation we need to treat seriously in the digital age. One example which always affects my use of libraries is the need for a password to gain access to digital content. I understand the need for password access to a system or to some content, but the way in which password-control is managed can make access much more difficult than it need be, for example if the user forgets a complicated string of numbers and letters and needs immediate access without waiting 24 hours for a new password. Of course today some of the most serious restrictions upon a user's access to content are not imposed by the librarian but by the content-provider, who requires the librarian to prevent access by users who are not authorised. If Ranganathan were alive today I feel sure that he would applaud the open access movement on the grounds that "books are for use".

2.2 Every person his or her book

Ranganathan's second law of library science, "every person his or her book", was for Ranganathan himself a vital element in universal education. The second law brings libraries into the realm of social policy. In 2007 universal education has still not been achieved and libraries still have a vital role in providing the sources for learning. In the digital era we have an opportunity, through the electronic networks, to provide learning materials to anybody in the world. Most national governments have policy commitments to extend access to education, and libraries have a vital role in supporting government initiatives of that kind. In Ranganathan's day those who wished to learn had to come to the library; now the library can come to those who wish to learn. For Ranganathan the law of "every person his or her book" was particularly important for those members of society who were disadvantaged in access to information, such as the women of his day. Today the disadvantaged are those without access to a computer linked to the internet, and maybe librarians could do more to support the provision of network connections, solar-powered laptops or any other technology to ensure that every person can have access to his or her digital content.

2.3 Every book its reader

The application of the third law of library science is less obvious in a digital library environment as the number of "books" available on the internet increases. Are there enough readers to read the volume of content available? There are millions of web-sites containing information of value to a reader somewhere in the world, and even a web-site on a most obscure topic may be able to show statistics on large numbers of downloads. But what has this type of use of information to do with libraries, which only offer a limited sub-set of

the world's information sources in their collections? The challenge the third law may present to librarians working in a digital environment is to think less in terms of collections and more in terms of access. Does a digital library have to collect any networked information in the sense of adding that information source to its stock? We are already in the situation of having many academic journal articles freely available through open web-sites, so a library need not purchase those articles unless the reader requires an added-value feature which a publisher has added to the text. The library as a channel to freely-available information is becoming more important than the library as the collector of information content.

2.4 Save the time of the reader

One of the frustrations facing a reader using a large research library is having to wait while a little-used book is fetched from a remote store or mailed from another library on inter-library loan. A reader using a small local library also experiences such delays but is more accustomed to working around such delays, whereas using a large research library raises expectations of easier access, expectations which are not always fulfilled. The user of a digital library has even higher expectations of rapid service than the user of a paper-based library. And yet access to digital content can be very slow. Has the librarian installed hardware, software and bandwidth sufficient to permit fast access to large datasets or image-banks? (If not the blame may lie with funding authorities rather than the librarian but the librarian has to make fast network access a strategic priority.) Has the librarian made available to the user sophisticated searching tools to help the user to identify content relevant to the user's needs? In a digital environment the reader's time can easily be wasted searching through large quantities of irrelevant information. Likewise a reader's time can be wasted identifying relevant content only to find that access to that content is denied by content-owners' pricing or licensing barriers. Open access to publicly funded content will do much to "save the time of the reader".

2.5 A library is a growing organism

In the paper environment about which S.R.Ranganathan wrote, the growth in the size of a library was a vital managerial issue. Since World War 2 many research libraries have accumulated so many volumes of books and journals that new buildings have had to be provided either on-site or as remote stores. Co-operative collection arrangements have developed so as to share the cost of acquiring and storing lesser-used volumes. How have these issues been changed by the digital revolution, when libraries no longer need new shelves to house electronic collections? The collaborative environment is now more about common purchasing than about common storage. Consortia of libraries have attempted to secure more favourable pricing from content-providers than could be obtained by a library acting alone. Larger collections of journals

(known as “big deals”) have been offered to readers through this modern expression of the law that “a library is a growing organism”. How libraries will continue to grow in an environment in which access to freely-available content increasingly replaces the collection of content through purchase is an unknown factor in the future of libraries. Libraries may appear to shrink in size rather than grow as digital replaces paper. And yet Ranganathan’s fifth law can still be valid if libraries place more emphasis upon service rather than upon collections. Living organisms change the pattern of their growth according to the environment in which they are placed, and in a digital environment library growth may take the form of new services rather than new acquisitions.

3 The significance of the Colon Classification in a digital environment

The intent of S.R.Ranganathan in devising the Colon Classification was to enable the reader to go straight to a specific book on the shelf instead of searching through a large general section to look for a book on the particular topic required. Classification may be a dying art and appear irrelevant in a digital environment. However, the way in which S.R.Ranganathan looked at knowledge and suggested arranging knowledge to meet a reader’s needs is very relevant to the way in which today’s librarians need to provide access to digital content. In the digital world finding the right piece of content depends upon combining different elements or facets of a topic, so that a search of the World Wide Web will differentiate between – for example – the social history of India in the 19th century and the economic history of India in the 20th century instead of retrieving items on the history of India. This is the digital equivalent to sending the reader to a specific place on the library shelves. Success depends upon the reader expressing the elements or facets of the topic accurately, as with the Colon Classification success depended upon the librarian’s skill in identifying the facets of a book’s subject.

Using a computer in what is essentially a faceted approach to a search for digital content has removed the need for an obligation Ranganathan correctly identified for “making the catalogue fully analytic and giving profuse subject cross-references”(Ranganathan, 1931). In the paper era such cross-references were essential if the reader was to find the specific item required when approaching the topic from a starting-point different from that of the cataloguer of the book. To an electronic search engine the starting-point for the search is irrelevant; all that matters is that all the facets are listed as words in the search box. The electronic era has brought its own challenges to the library profession, but it has also made the description of information and the retrieval of information much easier. We cannot know what S.R.Ranganathan would have thought of today’s technology, but he would have recognised and

applauded the continuing importance of the principles enshrined in the Five Laws of Library Science and in the Colon Classification.

4 An epitaph

Reading the words of S.R.Ranganathan today the modern librarian cannot fail to be impressed by his attention to detail. Every aspect of the management of a library is covered in the interests of the service to the reader. Superficially much of the detail appears irrelevant to 21st century librarianship, but if we concentrate upon the principles in the Five Laws and the Colon Classification we soon find parallels to our own situation. This was the genius of the man. Ranganathan can also be an inspiration in respect of the priority he gave to the service to the reader. Every aspect of library administration ultimately has the service to the reader as its “raison d’etre”. To a generation driven by technology this aspect of S.R.Ranganathan’s work is a vital inspiration.

References

- [1] Ranganathan, S. R. (1931). The Five Laws of Library Science. Madras: Madras Library Association and London: Edward Goldston, available in PDF format at <http://dlist.sir.arizona.edu/1220/>